

Chesapeake Islands Important Bird Area Fact Sheet

Location: Accomack County

Total Size: 1,706 ha (4,214 acres)

Elevation: 0-2.6 m (0-8.5 feet)

Site Description: The upper Chesapeake Bay supports more than 30 islands that are vestiges of an earlier era in the geological history of the Bay. In Virginia, the Chesapeake Bay Islands Important Bird Area includes 4 major island complexes including Tangier, the southern end of Smith, Great Fox, and Watts. The islands are primarily marsh with topographic highs or berms along the west-facing margins. They support barrier beaches and extensive tidal marshes. The islands also have both natural and dredge-spoil hummocks colonized by shrubs and loblolly pines. Tangier and Smith Islands support historic communities that depend on the water and tourism for their livelihoods.

Protection: Currently, a considerable portion of the area within the island complexes is privately owned. Watts Island has recently been annexed to the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. The Chesapeake Bay Foundation owns the educational facility on Great Fox Island and some additional land on both Tangier and Smith. The Virginia Marine Resources Commission has control over a small area of marsh designated as state common land.

Brown Pelican

Birds: These islands are isolated from the mainland by substantial distances and have generally been predator free making them attractive to nesting water birds. The barrier beaches and hummocks support significant colonies of colonial waterbirds including populations of species of concern such as Royal Tern, Common Tern, Black Skimmer, Little Blue Heron, and Glossy Ibis. The extensive marshes support significant populations of Seaside Sparrows and Forster's Terns. American Black Ducks and American Oystercatchers nest on berms and other topographic highs. These islands likely represent important stopover areas for shorebirds and marsh birds during spring and fall migration. Surrounding waters support large numbers of wintering waterfowl.



Conservation and Threats: The primary threat to this system is the loss of habitat due to erosion caused by rising sea levels. All of the islands have lost considerable surface area in recent memory. Given the important role that these islands play for sensitive bird species, efforts should be made to protect them from further erosion where possible. An additional threat is the colonization of the islands by ground predators such as raccoons, fox, feral cats, and Norway rats. These species are capable of rendering the islands unusable by ground nesters. In addition, continued expansion of

the Herring and Great Black-backed populations on these islands may be displacing other species or reducing reproductive rates. Threats from human disturbance seem to be limited at this time. With the exception of periodic population monitoring, very little management is being performed on behalf of birds or the habitats on which they depend.